

VZCZCXYZ0000
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHMO #0290/01 0371533
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 061533Z FEB 09
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1800
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUEHDX/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L MOSCOW 000290

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/05/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: COMMUNIST PARTY SHOWS NEW LIFE, BROADENS
CONSTITUENCY AMID ECONOMIC CRISIS

REF: MOSCOW 254

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor David Kostelancik for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: The Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) has benefited from the economic crisis by attracting increased membership and strengthening its position as a populist alternative to the party of power, United Russia. The invigorated Communists demonstrated January 31 that they can organize rallies across the country, and most observers expect KPRF will pick up votes in March 1 regional elections. These successes have resulted from the party's three-pronged strategy: parliamentary initiatives aimed at pocketbook issues; public protests and actions that demonstrate party vigor; and an "ideological campaign" to communicate their message and appeal to new and younger voters. In a win-win for the Communists and United Russia, KPRF builds its party rolls and increases its mandate among voters, while the regime channels leftist anti-government sentiments to a controlled arena that does not yet seriously threaten its hold on power. End summary.

Prong One: Parliamentary Measures and Pocketbook Issues

12. (C) KPRF's emboldened tactics during the economic crisis have stemmed largely from a three-pronged strategy aimed at building a lasting mandate and increased legitimacy among voters. The first prong focuses on passing or proposing laws that appeal to voters' pocketbook concerns. Communist leaders have lambasted the ruling government's handling of the economic crisis, claiming that it favors the rich and ignores systemic weaknesses of the capitalist system. In a February 5 meeting, KPRF Deputy Chairman Ivan Melnikov told us that the government's anti-crisis strategy was "not effective" and was "the same as the Titanic's after it hit the iceberg...to save the first-class passengers first." Without a clear plan that focuses on jobs and rising inflation, Melnikov added, unemployment and unrest will continue to grow throughout Russia.

13. (C) The KPRF has responded to the government's anti-crisis measures with far-reaching proposals for nationalization and aggressive state intervention to bolster production and employment. KPRF Chairman Gennadiy Zyuganov has repeatedly called, including most recently at a January 31 Dissenters' Day rally in Moscow (reftel), for complete government takeover of all natural resources in Russia in order to distribute the country's wealth directly to its citizens. Zyuganov also called on Putin and Medvedev to sack Finance Minister Aleksey Kudrin for his alleged bungling of the government's anti-crisis policies. However, KPRF lacks the votes in the State Duma to pass its own anti-crisis measures, rendering the radical nationalization proposal entirely rhetorical.

14. (C) The party may be more successful in launching

legislation on more targeted pocketbook issues that appeal to voters concerned about what Melnikov called "the three most important issues to voters": the growing cost of goods, higher tariffs on imports, and higher costs of medicine. Higher tariffs, particularly on automobiles, have proven a touchstone issue with the unexpected protests in December in Vladivostok. The KPRF likely would use relief for Russians on these issues to trumpet its success and appeal for increased voter support.

15. (C) Elsewhere on the parliamentary agenda, KPRF has vigorously opposed President Medvedev's proposed military reforms, and Zyuganov has called for Defense Minister Serdyukov to resign. Zyuganov held a roundtable on military reform on February 3, at which he blasted the reform proposals as efforts to destabilize the military and weaken Russia's ability to defend itself against invasion. Zyuganov identified the proposed cuts to the officer corps, which are intended to modernize the armed forces, as particularly pernicious to the morale and effectiveness of the military. Again, KPRF lacks the votes to thwart the proposed reforms, but in opposing it he speaks directly to one of the party's traditional constituencies: the military and veterans.

Prong Two: Protests and Public Actions

16. (C) The Communist Party has enjoyed unexpected leeway in opposing the ruling government, although within regulated limits. "Protests are the first step" to implementing change, Melnikov told us, adding that public actions will show the Russian people that it is safe to gather against the government. After staying home for the December 2008

Dissenters' Day events, the Communists organized a rally in the center of Moscow for the January 31 Dissenters' Day. Approximately 1,000 people attended the rally, most of whom were elderly supporters carrying Soviet flags and photos of Lenin and Stalin. KPRF held other rallies on January 31 in more than a dozens major cities. The party's next set of rallies, according to Melnikov, will take place February 23 (Defenders Day, formerly Soviet Army Day, now a public holiday in Russia).

Prong Three: "Ideological Campaign" and New Constituencies

17. (C) Melnikov proposed an "ideological campaign" as the third front to win wider support, both to communicate facts about the crisis and to attract new demographics to the party. "People do not understand what it going on," Melnikov claimed, which has rendered them, in effect, politically inactive. Getting the Communists' word out will not be easy, however, given their near-total exclusion from the national airwaves. Zyuganov has vocally pressed the government on broadcast media access, particularly after Putin's most recent 3-hour televised national call-in program in December.

According to Russian law, Zyuganov argued, the Communists should receive an equal amount of airtime. Melnikov told us that a new draft law would be introduced later in February that would ensure that all Duma parties receive free national airtime. In the meantime, Melnikov boasted, the party's website will continue to be a popular resource for interested voters.

18. (C) The KPRF ideological campaign also entails broadening its constituency beyond traditional strongholds of pensioners and veterans, and party leaders recognized that they cannot count on pensioners at the polls for many more years. In fact, Melnikov told us that he believed that pensioners increasingly are voting for United Russia because the ruling party controls the purse strings to pay pensions. Despite the overwhelmingly elderly demographics present at the January 31 rally, Melnikov told us that the average KPRF member is between 45-55 years old. The party is enjoying a "growing dialogue with the youth," Melnikov added, noting that over 20,000 students are now members. Also, according to the party's website, the average age of its Central

Committee members recently has declined by six years. To appeal to younger voters, KPRF has begun to support increased government subsidies to students, and even raised the issue publicly on Russian television with President Medvedev on January 28.

March Elections: KPRF Expects Higher Turnout, Fraud

¶9. (C) Most observers have predicted that the Communists will benefit more than other opposition parties during the March 1 regional and municipal elections. Zyuganov has openly predicted that in Bryansk Region the Communists will win a majority in the regional дума -- a feat that would mark the first time that a party other than United Russia has won a regional majority in more than three years. In Volgograd, even the United Russia Deputy Chairman of the City Council forecast to us in December that the Communists would increase their tally at the polls by at least 5 percent (KPRF holds 8 of the 38 regional дума seats). Other regions with strong KPRF branches, such as Khakassia and Vladimir, are anticipated to demonstrate the strength of the Communists' appeal.

¶10. (C) Despite these expected boosts at the polls, Melnikov lamented to us that "tendencies are already understood" and that the government would blatantly falsify results in favor of United Russia. For example, he predicted that in Kabardino-Balkaria (where KPRF currently holds 7 percent of regional дума seats), the Communists would receive 33 percent of the vote, "but the computers will say we received 12 percent." Melnikov told us his party would appeal any electoral fraud, but he concluded that the final numbers are out of the voters' hands. (Note: KPRF has appealed alleged electoral fraud in past elections, most recently in Kemerovo after the October 2008 elections. Their efforts there, and elsewhere, have been largely unsuccessful. End note.)

Comment

¶11. (C) In our meeting, Melnikov did not display any of the exuberance for complete nationalization that Zyuganov has called for at public events. KPRF's populist rhetoric, more likely, is an effort to enhance the party's brand name and build a legitimate mandate by aiming at conspicuous targets (e.g., banks, oligarchs, and government members such as

Kudrin). The ruling government, in return, benefits by allowing KPRF some space for protest: leftist opposition elements are channeled into a controlled space, and Zyuganov's neo-Soviet stump speeches render him unpalatable to the majority of Russians. As a result, United Russia maintains its hold on power and moderates opposition energies, while KPRF bolsters its party rolls and burnishes its credentials without having to worry about actually taking power (and responsibility) during such troubled times.

BEYRLE